

**The History of the Thomas-Dale Neighborhood, the
Thomas-Dale Block Club, and the Impact the Thomas-
Dale Block Club has made in its Neighborhood**

By:

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CURA RESOURCE COLLECTION

**Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
University of Minnesota
330 Humphrey Center**

Organization Name Thomas-Dale Block Club, Inc. (TDBC)

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Project Goal The U-ACT project focused on a research of the history of the Thomas-Dale Block Club and a definition of the impact it has had on the community as well as its major accomplishments. The research assistant used a variety of sources that included but were not limited to Police statistics, all written materials on TDBC, neighbor and staff interviews, and collaborative partner interviews and surveys. The product from this project was the write-up and design of the complete history and impact report of TDBC.

Grant Purpose The 50% graduate student researched the history of Thomas-Dale Block Club and defined the impact it has had on the community as well as its major accomplishments by using a variety of sources including but not limited to:

- a) Police statistics,
- b) all written materials on TDBC,
- c) neighbor and staff interviews,
- d) collaborative partner interviews and surveys.

The graduate student also wrote and designed the complete history and impact report of TDBC.

Qualifications

- 1. Registered U of MN graduate student for duration of appointment
- 2. Strong research skills
- 3. Strong people skills
- 4. Strong writing skills
- 5. Computer skills.

Begin/End Dates October 1st, 1997 to March 15th, 1998

Introduction

This paper seeks to define the impact of the Thomas-Dale Block Club in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. I begin with a discussion about the history of the neighborhood in order to provide background knowledge about what was taking place when the block club was formed. I then discuss the history of the block club itself from its point of conception in 1991 until the present. Following that is a summary of the perceptions of the block club from residents and others who have come in contact with the block club. Finally, I define the impact the Thomas-Dale Block Club has made in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood based on my research. The majority of my research was done through in-person or telephone interviews. A small part of my information was gathered by sending questionnaire forms to people so they could fill them out on their own time. This method was not as thorough as when I asked the questions myself because I could not ask the interviewees to expand upon their ideas. I used a standard question format in order to gain the same information from people that I believed would be useful in writing this paper. This is shown in Exhibit 1. In order to gain information that would be as objective and unbiased as possible I interviewed people who were thought to have both favorable and unfavorable views of the block club. The names of all of the people I contacted for interviews were given to me by Johnny Howard and Patty Lammers. They encouraged me to talk to all of these people despite the fact that some of their opinions may not be favorable. I was able to talk to a number of people who did not have positive opinions of the block club. However, many of those with unfavorable opinions were not willing to be interviewed even though I told everyone I spoke with that everything they said would be kept confidential. Most of the quotes in my paper are not footnoted for this reason. Instead I decided to include the names of the people I spoke with in the bibliography. Although I was not able to interview everyone I wanted due to time constraints and busy schedules, as well as the fact that some people were not willing to speak with me, I believe that I got a broad and encompassing representation of views for my paper. I enjoyed working with the staff and members of the block club. They were very flexible and willing to help me get a hold of the information I needed.

History of the Thomas-Dale Neighborhood

The Thomas-Dale neighborhood has changed significantly over the past thirty years. Up until the 1950's and early 1960's the neighborhood was all white. Most of the homes were owned. The community was very safe, quiet, close-knit, and self-sufficient. There were movie theaters, bakeries, and family-owned restaurants within walking distance. At that time, University Avenue was the crossing line. To the south of University it was predominantly black. When the 94 Freeway was built, people were displaced from their homes and started moving north of University. Racial tensions escalated as blacks started moving into the neighborhood and riots broke out in the late 1960's. A second component of the change was the presence of urban flight about twenty to twenty-five years ago. Many of the white working middle class fled to the suburbs at this time. Cars opened up opportunities for these people. They no longer had to live close to where they worked. In addition, the decline in manufacturing jobs affected the lives of many blue-collar workers in this area of St. Paul. Mastering technical skills was not enough to propel them into a working environment that was slowly becoming white-collar. The changes in the economy of St. Paul were mirrored throughout the country. Many people were left without jobs because they did not have the proper skill-set to adapt to the new marketplace.

Many people in the neighborhood feel that the system of accountability that used to be present in the neighborhood degenerated in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Today parents aren't as involved in their children's lives as they used to be. They and even their children don't know all the other kids in their neighborhood. Adults who grew up in the neighborhood clearly remember never lacking things to do after school and on weekends. All children in the neighborhood attended the same school and spent time together outside of school. This feeling of community changed with integration. Although it may have been useful, a common sentiment among residents is that it contributed to the loss of a close-knit community. Other modern-day contributions to this are the rise in single parent families and families where both parents work, as well as the general busyness of daily life that wasn't present before. Another crisis point in the history of the Thomas-Dale neighborhood was the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980's. Many

residents believe that at this time the neighborhood was at its breaking point. People didn't seem to care about anything. The growing presence of absentee landlords also led to a general decline in the area. Perhaps the most visible change in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood has been the increase in diversity. In addition to blacks coming into the neighborhood in the late 1960's Asian immigrants started moving in during the late 1970's. Many residents believe that diversity can be a very positive experience for a neighborhood. However, because it has been difficult to involve non-English speakers and people for whom English is a second language in community life it has contributed to the loss of a sense of community.

Some residents believe that the neighborhood has made positive improvements in the 1990's, while others believe the exact opposite. One resident said there has been a general improvement in the community and greater awareness among residents about concerns, problem areas, and how to go about tackling issues. One factor to consider is there are, indeed, significantly less drug houses now than there were in the 1980's and early 1990's. In addition, there is more economic development and investment in the community. In fact, one resident stated that the neighborhood has become an entrepreneurial center. The Asian population is investing in businesses along University Avenue. This is reflected in the number of Asian businesses along that street. Also, new houses are being bought and sold. One person said, "It is a positive sign that people are willing to spend at least \$80,000 on a house in this neighborhood. It speaks of a certain level of confidence." Neighborhood beautification is another area that some residents believed has changed for the better. One resident said that when she first moved here, she had to pick up hypodermic needles and used condoms in her yard. She also had to deal with people smoking crack on her property. Today prostitutes aren't around her house all the time and the neighborhood has become cleaner. Some residents point to the fact that the apathy that was so pervasive ten years ago has disintegrated. People care more about the whole community and the betterment of all. The neighborhood is perceived in a better light now. Money has been put into housing improvements and neighborhood beautification projects such as gardening. People seem to be taking more pride in their property. City programs have been established such as first-time buyer programs, mortgage foreclosure

programs, and loans to fix up houses and build new houses. There is much more citizen involvement, stronger and better reaction to citizen need by the city, county, and police, and a greater responsiveness from the non-profit and government sectors.

Other residents believe that the deterioration of the Thomas-Dale neighborhood is continuing and shows no signs of improvement in the near future. One contributing factor may be the perception that as the elderly leave the neighborhood they sell their homes to younger people who come in for short periods of time before they leave for the suburbs. This, along with the rise in absentee landlords, housing deterioration, and school desegregation may contribute to the lack of cohesion that some residents experience. These factors have caused them to feel that investment in the community is not as high as it used to be forty years ago. In addition, although the general levels of crime, drugs, and prostitution have declined, they still exist in Thomas-Dale and this contributes to residents' feelings of declining safety. Some residents question if the general decline of the Thomas-Dale neighborhood may be due, at least in part, to the general decline of society. One person described the changes that are taking place in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood as cyclical. He said that although they may be on the upturn right now, not all people are benefiting from the upswing. Poor neighborhoods like Thomas-Dale are in the process of being seized by the middle class, while people of low incomes are forced to the margins or out of the neighborhood entirely. Currently, people want to move into this area because of accessibility. It is close to downtown, bus lines, and major shopping areas. However, the poor aren't beneficiaries of the upswing. The middle class is benefiting at the expense of others.

Due to such varying opinions of those interviewed it is difficult to state with precision whether or not the community has improved significantly during the 1990's. However, the fact that some people believe it has illustrates that for at least some residents life in Thomas-Dale has become safer, residents feel a greater sense of empowerment, and they feel that at least to some extent their needs are being met. The more troubling data indicates that work still needs to be done. Indeed, just like a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, one can only measure the greatness of a community from the least favorable perception of a resident. This is where

organizations like the Thomas-Dale Block Club see its calling. The Thomas-Dale Block Club provides residents with assistance or directs them to other groups or individuals that can help. They appeal to people to take responsibility and accountability for making their neighborhood a safe, comfortable place to live. One of their goals is to unite people and provide a forum to deal with neighborhood concerns. Their collaborative efforts with city and state agencies have made them highly effective in accomplishing their mission to make Thomas-Dale a safe haven for all residents. Many of the positive changes can be directly attributed to work the block club has been involved in and accomplished with the help of its residents. But they are also the first to acknowledge that their duty to their community is just beginning and will not end until all residents feel safe in their homes and in their neighborhood.

History of the Thomas-Dale Block Club

The Thomas-Dale Block Club began in 1990 with the efforts of Johnny Howard and Les Barrett. They were both involved in cleaning up their own individual blocks, 600 Van Buren and 900 Sherburne respectively, when Bill Wilson, the city councilman at the time, realized they were doing the same thing and decided they needed to meet each other. He set up the initial meeting between Johnny and Les. As plans got underway for a community meeting, which was essentially the beginning of the Thomas-Dale Block Club, Bill Wilson helped them get off the ground by securing needed resources. Thus, Johnny Howard, Les Barrett, and Bill Wilson were the key founders of the organization. Each needed the other two to realize the goal of infusing the Thomas-Dale neighborhood with safety and spirit and encouraging pride from within.

Johnny and Les's first plan was to set up an informal meeting to ask neighbors if they were experiencing the same concerns and, if so, what could be done to address them. Six hundred flyers were sent out for the first meeting, however, no one showed up. Johnny and Les then decided to take a more aggressive approach and started knocking on doors. They wanted to be direct and get personal. People were much more receptive to this. Johnny and Les talked to many neighbors about their concerns and listened to what they had to say. The second

meeting, where people were notified entirely by word of mouth was held at St. Adalbert's Church and between seventy-five and one hundred people showed up. It was apparent that many residents had concerns about their neighborhood. Most of these concerns related to crime and safety. People wanted to feel comfortable in their own homes. Johnny and Les took a different approach than many other organizations had in the past. Many of these groups hadn't asked for resident input and, more important, didn't work with them to solve their problems. Johnny and Les started the vehicle of resident involvement by bringing them directly to the meeting table where they could voice their concerns and letting the community as whole decide if it was an issue or not.

At this time people were afraid of other residents in the neighborhood. Homes were basically "prisons." Johnny and Les encouraged neighbors to come out of their homes and express their thoughts and concerns about the area in which in they lived. Through these community meetings it became apparent that racism existed in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. For example, on one block of Thomas whites couldn't walk down the street without being harassed. The same situation existed for blacks on another block. People of different races were not comfortable with each other. Community meetings brought people together and helped to break down racial tension. The Thomas-Dale Block Club set up tables on these blocks to make themselves visible. They wanted people to know they were not alone in their fears and concerns.

The year 1990 was filled with Johnny Howard and Les Barrett conducting community meetings and trying to make themselves as visible as possible. No funding was given to the block club this year. There were no boards or committees. Meetings were set up and governed by Johnny and Les. They spent the year connecting to other residents of Thomas-Dale. In 1991 and 1992 there was still no funding. During these early years a couple of residents started taking ownership by going to every meeting and voicing their concerns. The first board was elected in 1991 when the Thomas-Dale Block Club became incorporated. Les was elected President and Johnny was Vice-President. Between 1990 and 1992 the block club consisted of all volunteers. The focused on four main issues: crime and safety, youth, seniors, and clean and affordable housing.

In its early years the Thomas-Dale Block Club was very reactionary. They identified problems and solved them. They took this stance out of necessity. There were drug houses on every other block. There was too much violent crime in the neighborhood. Something had to be done about the shootings and stabbings in the area. This is where the Thomas-Dale Block Club saw its calling in the beginning.

From 1990 to 1994 the media portrayed the Thomas-Dale neighborhood in a negative light. It seemed as though every day at least one story was on the news about the rampant crime and prostitution in the neighborhood. Nothing positive about the neighborhood was being shown on television or written about in the newspaper. In response to this the Thomas-Dale Block Club decided not to give any negative interviews that would fuel the poor perception the public as whole had about the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. Pride was the order of the day. Johnny and Les tried to stand for what was honorable and fair. That is how they decided they needed to make a difference.

Late in 1992 the first grant was given to the block club in the amount of \$2000. This money was used for flyers and printing services that could get the message of the Thomas-Dale Block Club out into the community and lasted until May 1993. In December 1993, the block club was awarded \$14,800 from the city. They used it to purchase lights and safety locks. The purpose of buying light fixtures was to avert crime in problem areas in the neighborhood. Criminals don't like to be seen and there were areas in the neighborhood that were conducive to their activities because they were so poorly lit. Installing lights in these areas was an effort to reduce crime. In 1993 the block club still had no staff.

In 1991 the main purpose of the block club was to meet and address crime, as well as respond to neighborhood concerns. 1992 was essentially the same. In 1993 the block club worked with Bill Wilson to help establish the FORCE unit. The FORCE unit is part of the St. Paul Police Department that works on the neighborhood level to address crime. They work in collaboration with community organizations to address the needs and concerns of the residents, as well as any housing issues or complaints regarding individual behavior that is considered a nuisance or a threat.

In 1994 Johnny Howard was hired as the Executive Director. The Thomas-Dale Block Club still dealt with the same issues as it had in its previous three years, a big one being the existence of many drug houses in the area. Grotto and Edmund, in particular, were drug havens. The block club used the same method of getting people to take note of the block club that had worked so well in the beginning, specifically, going door to door to get the attention of residents. It was in 1994 when the Thomas-Dale Block Club implemented the slogan RAP: Responsibility, Accountability, and Possibility, as a way to hold people accountable and urge them to take action towards the betterment of their community. The block club began to get more aggressive at this time. They began identifying people and houses that were a nuisance to the community and going after drug dealers, problem properties and their owners. The block club's attitude was "we don't care who cleans it up—just clean it up!"¹ They worked hard to bring the city of St. Paul and the health department in to help clean up the mess that existed in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. The Thomas-Dale Block Club's impact was felt deeply in the neighborhood in 1994.

By early 1995 there was a visible reduction in criminal activity in the area. Problems still existed but progress was being made. In mid-1995 there weren't any visible crack houses. Forty-five to fifty crack houses had reduced to four or five.² One significant event took place in 1994 that demonstrates the aggressive attitude the block club had adopted. The Thomas-Dale Block Club took one family to court because of criminal activity among members of that household. The block club received much support and got very little opposition from neighbors regarding this case.

The Thomas-Dale Block Club has always known how important it is to involve the entire family in community programs in order to make a real difference and positively influence a community across generational lines. They have been involved in the lives of youth since 1992. In addition to their after-school and summer programs, they also host the Youth Leadership Academy and Hope Unlimited. The Youth Leadership Academy is a year-round program for children ages 13 to 18. It gives young people an understanding of the political process and helps

¹ Johnny Howard, January 14, 1998.

enhance their leadership skills. Hope Unlimited is also year-round. In the summer they hold day camps where children play sports, go on field trips, listen to guest speakers, create art, and participate in recreational activities. The academics and athletics program is held during the school year and includes tutoring three times a week. The block club is a big supporter of the West Minnehaha Recreational Center where many activities for youth take place. Currently, they have secured \$700,000 from the state of Minnesota and the city of St. Paul through a grant. They will be using this money to build an addition to the West Minnehaha Rec Center. In 1995, they hosted a booster club to make sure young people knew more about the Thomas-Dale Block Club. They also started 31 Days of Hope in May of that same year. Every day in May the block club holds many activities designed to produce high visibility. For example, they hold community marches and invite influential community figures such as public officials to participate. They also have ice cream socials, cultural entertainment, street dances, and gospel in the park. It has been an annual event ever since.

In 1996 the Thomas-Dale Block Club's main agenda was still to fight crime and drugs. There were four properties in particular that periodically had problems. The block club tried to work with the landlord and tenants to clean up the properties. However, they received no cooperation. Finally, they wrote a nuisance petition and had the property closed and condemned for a year. One organization, in particular, did not agree with the actions the block club had taken. Their belief was that the block club displaces families and attacks victims. The block club's view was that the owners of the building were running a business. The city of St. Paul would revoke a business license of a restaurant, bar, or store if it was run in the same manner. Perhaps the family that was displaced was victimized but they had over a year to find alternative housing. The basic sentiment at the block club was that instead of fighting against them, this organization could have worked with them for a solution that could make everyone happy.

In addition to the St. Paul Police Department, the Thomas-Dale Block Club also partners with the St. Paul Department of Health, specifically the Code Enforcement Department. This department performs summary abatements for the purpose of nuisance elimination. The block

² Ibid

club is a contract vendor for the Health Department. The block club receives money for cleaning up private properties. This is another example of collaboration between the block club and the city of St. Paul in order to improve the lives of residents in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood.

By 1996 and 1997 the number of drug houses in the Thomas-Dale area were in the low teens.³ The Thomas-Dale Block Club encouraged and worked with other community organizations to rehabilitate or build twenty new homes. ⁴This wasn't even imaginable in 1990 or 1991. The Thomas-Dale Block Club had established a clean, comfortable neighborhood over the period of seven years that could not have been done by a realtor or any other outside organization. It had to be done from within. In 1991 and 1992 there were over 300 vacant and boarded homes in the city of St. Paul.⁵ Over thirty of those existed in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. The Thomas-Dale Block Club forced the city to tear down dilapidated houses and rehabilitate them. They take the credit for the positive housing movement. Economic development was also taking place as businesses began moving into the neighborhood again. This was a clear sign that improvements had been made. No one would open a business in a community that was filled with drugs and crime. Neighborhood children were becoming more courteous and respectful. The Thomas-Dale Block Club is one organization that contributed to these changes.

The Thomas-Dale Block Club began to write proposals for grant money from foundations in 1994. This was possible because people were beginning to recognize their work. Also in 1994 the Four Seasons program started with the help and collaborative efforts of Bill Wilson. The city was not quick enough in tending to snow plowing and other neighborhood maintenance necessities of the seasons. The block club was given a pilot grant from the city of St. Paul to start the program and from then on it has evolved into a full-fledged employment program. The block club hires youth and adults to work for Four Seasons and pays above minimum wage. The program grosses \$200,000 per year for the Thomas-Dale Block Club and this money is put back into the community in the form of salaries and operating costs.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

The Thomas Dale Block Club holds open and public meetings. They encourage people to bring issues to the table. They want residents to have the opportunity to challenge others, as well as the chance to think about current problems and future solutions for the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. The block club wants to agitate, stimulate, and challenge residents. They also want to involve all age groups from youth to seniors. They are working to build a "village" and want to deal with the business of making this "village" home for all of its residents. The block club also encourages people to vote so that they can make a political difference in their community.

The year 1998 calls for some changes for the block club in terms of focus and vision. Meetings will be called around hope and the possibilities of a clean, comfortable, safe neighborhood. They are changing their focus from a reactive organization that fights against crime, drugs, and prostitution to a more positive neighborhood-building one that is more proactive. The Thomas-Dale Block Club had to clean up the mess in their neighborhood and now they are working on rebuilding it.

Perceptions of the Thomas-Dale Block Club from Residents and Others Who Come in Contact with the Organization

The majority of the people I interviewed felt that the Thomas-Dale Block Club has played a positive role in the community. In their minds the block club is responsible for bringing about many of the improvements that have been made since it was formed in 1990. They see the block club as strong force in the community that gives people a sense of hope and unites neighbors towards a common cause, the betterment of the community they live in. One person said, "The block club has organized people...they have encouraged positive steps. Their strength is that they have the ability to work with everyone to get the job done." Another stated, "The block club has played a major role. They have gotten the community organized, given direction, and facilitated progress. They have helped neighbors get to know each other. This is important in increasing safety and building a sense of community. They have played an advocacy role in helping people get the resources they need." One of the block club's solutions has been to provide residents with a number to call to report problems and complaints or direct them to

someone who will listen to their complaints and take appropriate action. Many residents had no where to go because they felt the city did not respond quickly enough, if they responded at all. One resident said, "I may not call the city with complaints but I will call the block club." A significant goal of the block club is to let people know that to make a neighborhood better each resident needs to assume responsibility and take ownership. They have opened up an avenue for residents to do that by giving residents a way to hold themselves and others accountable for their actions.

Residents applaud the work the Thomas-Dale Block Club has done with seniors and youth. Many people believe the needs of these two groups in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood were being ignored. The block club programs for these age groups has been very valuable in providing them with productive social activities. Seniors, in particular, were afraid of leaving their homes. Many of them were unable to drive. In essence, they were prisoners in their own homes, cut off from the outside world. The Thomas-Dale Block Club has always made an effort to involve seniors by valuing their opinions and presence. They schedule activities, as well as social events such as holiday parties, to help them get back into the community many of them have lived in for their entire lives. The block club also helps with home renovations needed to maintain a safe living environment that seniors were be unable to do themselves or would have to hire an outside business that may charge high prices. The block club makes these improvements and charges discounted rates. Many seniors I spoke with were very appreciative of the efforts the Thomas-Dale Block Club has made to make them feel like they are an important part of the community. One senior said, "They have done work on my home for a fee less than what I would have had to pay outside. This meant a lot to me because I wouldn't have known whom else to call. The block club has been helpful in other ways as well. For example, they will pick you up if you can't drive. It has also proved to be a social place with dinners and holiday parties." Many residents recognized the activities the Thomas-Dale Block Club has for youths as a positive way for them to learn responsibility. It also provides them with a place to go where they can be productive and have fun. Not only does the block club organize educational and sports activities for young people, they also host holiday parties. Some of people I interviewed commented on the fact that

most of the children in the neighborhood seem to be more respectful and courteous now than they did before. This type of community support was greatly needed in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood and, in the eyes of many of the people I spoke with, the block club has definitely fulfilled the need.

Another area many people feel the block club has been successful is in addressing crime. One person said, "They have gotten rid of a lot of drug houses which is a big change but there are still some around...it will never be the same as it used to be but things have gotten better. They have the ability to mobilize resources and clean up many blocks instead of just one." Many residents remarked that things would be a lot worse if the block club didn't exist. "The block club has controlled quite a bit of crime and prostitution. If it wasn't for the block club it would have been rampant." However, some people also acknowledged that they still have a long way to go. "The block club has helped get drug addicts, drug houses, and prostitution out of the area. The process is not complete but it is better. It takes time for improvement. I would like to see people get more involved because the block club can't do it alone." Indeed, the Thomas-Dale Block Club recognizes this and encourages people to take ownership for their community. They work to enable residents to act upon their duty and responsibility to their community. In addition, they have gotten the community organized, given direction, facilitated progress, and perhaps most important, helped neighbors get to know each other. This is important in increasing safety and building a sense of community. Another way the block club addresses crime is to make themselves visible with an "in your face" attitude. One person said, "They confront issues head-on and don't assign blame. They look for a solution but don't assign a scapegoat. The block club has been a facilitator of change, not a hindrance like other groups in the past." While it may be true that the Thomas-Dale neighborhood has a long way to go in order to eliminate crime entirely the block club has made strong strides in addressing the problem and curbing it to an extent. Like many of the residents, the block club is aware that they need the cooperation of their residents in order to make the neighborhood safe and this sentiment forms one of the basic tenets of the organization.

The Thomas-Dale Block Club has also addressed the housing issues of the Thomas-Dale neighborhood as part of a neighborhood safety and beautification program. They have encouraged other organizations in the community to get rid of dilapidated housing and build new homes. Although the latter is valuable, one resident expressed concern that they were focusing too much on supporting the building of new houses rather than renovating homes that are currently occupied by residents. Their Four Seasons program is a direct effort to improve the look of the neighborhood by doing seasonal work. For example, in the wintertime, the block club hires neighborhood residents to work for them shoveling driveways, alleys, and abandoned lots in an effort to keep the neighborhood appearance clean. In the spring and summer the focus of the program shifts to gardening and mowing lawns. This program is unique because it uses neighborhood resources, people in this case, to invest back into the community. The block club creates jobs, pays its employees above minimum wage, and helps to raise the quality of life in the neighborhood, as well as the expectations of residents. Many residents praise the Four Seasons program, especially seniors for whom it is difficult to do this type of maintenance. The Thomas-Dale Block Club started Four Seasons because the city of St. Paul was not being responsive to neighborhood needs. One person said that this program serves as an example of "how [the block club] cut out the middleman...and started a program that revolves around improving the community and the quality of life for residents in that community. Many neighborhoods should replicate the ideas of the Thomas-Dale Block Club. They pick up where the city leaves off." Another creative approach that the block club has taken that has also received praise from residents is their 31 Days in May program. "The block club has done a lot of good organizing to bring positive attention and identification to the neighborhood." The block club is a firm believer in the idea that improving the quality of life of a community will help to improve the lives of its residents. They have taken this approach one step further by including residents in the challenge to make their neighborhood as safe and as livable as possible.

The leadership of Johnny Howard has also received praise from many of the people I spoke with. He has been described as a very dynamic leader who has been able to reach to the core of many of the problems present in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood and address them in a

positive way. He is seen by many as a visionary and a hero. Many people believe the block club wouldn't be where it is today without the leadership of Johnny Howard. One person stated, "Johnny Howard has done miraculous work. He is a vocal player." Another said, "Johnny Howard has been a powerful role model. He has built an incredible amount of momentum. In the last four years he has mobilized, inspired, and empowered residents to get them involved." Johnny Howard has also been commended for his work with children and families. Many residents feel that his work with children is extremely important because he "catches them when they are young" and instills in them a set of values they can carry throughout their entire life. One resident commented that young people, in particular, are able to look to Johnny as a strong black, male role model. He is a great example of how one person can really make a difference in a community. Positive role modeling is necessary for people of all ages and has helped make the community stronger. However, his style has also received criticism from some people. One person said, "Johnny Howard needs to learn how to curb his tongue and develop diplomatic tact." It is highly unlikely that everyone approves all aspects of a leader's leadership style. When a leader makes such strong and powerful statements he is opening himself up to criticism and some people may disagree with his chosen tactics. Johnny Howard has chosen his particular style based on his view of the urgency and magnitude of the problems in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. The fact some people criticize him may mean he is simply doing his job.

The efforts of the Thomas-Dale Block Club were widely recognized by most of the people I spoke with. The general consensus was that they have definitely played a major role in the improvements that have come about in the past eight years. In fact, many residents feel that they have helped stabilize a community that was very unstable after the 1980's. Without them the neighborhood would have fallen apart. They credit the block club for salvaging what was left of the area, organizing people, and instituting positive change. The block club has provided a place for residents to develop community ties and community support and shown people how to work with the city to get things done. Their cooperative and collaborative efforts received much praise and recognition. On a more personal basis they have helped residents feel more united with one

another. They have allowed people to get to know each other so there is less fear. One resident said, "The Thomas-Dale Block Club is at the core of the positive things that have gone on."

However, not all the sentiments about the block club were favorable. One resident said that he felt the support of the block club but has yet to see any positive change. Another said that they seemed more effective in their early years, but he did acknowledge that they are a vital and necessary presence in the neighborhood. One person I spoke with said that the block club has helped in some areas such as crime, but not in others and that they have the capacity to have an even greater impact in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. He credits this to the fact that many organizations get caught up in the "term of the decade" such as empowerment, economic development, and diversity. "They justify their existence to address social problems and write proposals behind it but they haven't defined what it is and how to measure it." Another person isn't quite sure if the block club can do any more simply because of the negative reputation of the community. Some of those interviewed were more direct in their criticisms. One person said, "Resident's sentiments could be harnessed more often and their interests could be represented more effectively. There could also be more planning and thinking ahead, be more proactive rather than reactive, and do something more than just talking." Another person stated that the block club needs to be more cooperative because the energy they waste in fighting could be used more productively. This person said that the mentality of the block club is "them vs. us" rather than "we." Along the same lines, another person interviewed said that "the block club has good ideas but they need to work on implementation. They have a 'gang mentality.' They accuse people without proof." Yet another said, "The block club hasn't provided a concrete way to get help. This breeds hysteria. They have a vigilante mentality. The perception is that they are primarily homeowners, seniors, and whites in the block club and that it isn't representative of the community. If their message was more positive rather than punitive people would be more willing to join. The block club is not a safe place for people likely to be targeted, such as those of low income." Some residents also commented that the block club needs to do more outreach to the Southeast Asian community in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. One resident said, "[It is] an ongoing struggle to include the Hmong in the block club. They need to bring everyone together."

One of the strongest criticisms I received relates to the fact that the block club has little written documentation of the improvements they have made. "The outcome of their activities is unknown and not provable." While the progress of the Thomas-Dale Block Club may not have been adequately documented, the improvements they have made are legitimate as is reflected in the minds of most of the people interviewed.

Impact of the Thomas-Dale Block Club in the Thomas-Dale Neighborhood

The Thomas-Dale Block Club has definitely made a positive impact in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. They have helped the neighborhood climb out of what many of those I spoke with had called "rock bottom," the aftermath of the effects of the 1980's and the preceding decades. Like many people I interviewed attest to, the efforts of the block club were necessary to pull the neighborhood out of despair and build the community into a productive and peaceful place to live. Although this process is still ongoing, they have made remarkable progress over the past eight years. In that time, the block club has become a strong presence in the neighborhood. They have built themselves up from a small business operating out of a basement to an organization that is widely known and recognized not only by residents, but also by city and state agencies. In addition, they have gained the credibility that allows them to collaborate with these departments in order to improve the lives of residents in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. They have made improvements in many sectors of life in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood, including the objectives they first set out to address, namely crime and safety, housing, seniors, and youth. They have also infused the neighborhood with qualities such as spirit, unity, and hope as a way to improve the quality of life for residents. Although these may be difficult to precisely measure, based on the information I gathered they form the core of many of the improvements that have been made. Most of the block club's work is praiseworthy. However, I will suggest certain areas that when improved will allow the block club to have an even greater impact in their neighborhood.

The block club's work with seniors has been outstanding. Many of the seniors I spoke with were very appreciative of all the efforts the block club has made to include them in so many activities, help them out with chores, and generally make the neighborhood a safer and friendlier place to live. For many of the seniors who have lived in Thomas-Dale their entire life the block club has helped them enjoy their neighborhood once again. This reward is invaluable. Their work with youth is also commendable. I believe the block club planned very strategically when deciding to work alongside the West Minnehaha Recreational Center. It has given the block club an opportunity to reach kids in an environment that many gravitate to naturally at that age. In addition, their activities with youth are very broad. This gives the block club the ability to include children with a wide range of interests in their programs. The number of children they have positively impacted, as well as those they have the potential to impact in the future rises dramatically. Perhaps most significant is the fact that the block club tries to work with young children to instill in them a positive set of values, including the responsibility and accountability that they stress so strongly among adults in the neighborhood. Children who grow up with these values have a great potential to become productive adults. The block club is creating a path to success for the children in their neighborhood.

The Thomas-Dale Block Club has raised the level of safety in the community. Ten years ago residents were afraid to walk outside. Today that has all changed. The level of fear among residents has declined dramatically. One of the most significant ways the block club has reduced the level of crime is by sending the message that it is simply unacceptable. They have made themselves very visible proponents of safety. They are not afraid to make sure people know they must and, more important, will suffer great consequences unless they change their ways. They have also fought publicly to get rid of drug houses and other nuisances in the neighborhood. Having the St. Paul Police Department on their side makes the message even stronger. The collaboration of the Thomas-Dale Block Club with city and local agencies is one of the keys to their success. By partnering with the police department, the Department of Health, and other organizations they increase their influence and ability to implement change among residents with others who share similar goals. The Thomas-Dale Block Club undoubtedly has a long way to go

to eradicate crime completely and it is questionable if anyone can achieve that. However, it is the block club's duty to keep that goal in mind because they owe it to the residents of their community.

The block club has made dramatic improvements in neighborhood beautification. Most of the houses in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood were built decades ago. It is only natural for them to deteriorate with age. The block club has encouraged organizations to rebuild many of the houses that were contributing to the run-down look of the neighborhood. In this way, they have improved the appearance of the neighborhood, helped residents who would have been unable to afford hiring an outside contractor, and raised the quality of life and standard of expectations for residents. Perhaps the block club can evaluate the time they spend supporting the building of new houses versus renovating older homes to determine how they can best use their resources. Their Four Seasons program has also played a significant role in neighborhood beautification. It has received only praise from the people I spoke with. However, their success with it goes deeper than physical improvements. This program is a model that other community organizations should follow. The Thomas-Dale Block Club has reinvested in their community using their own resources. This is a wonderful illustration that many communities do, indeed, have the resources they need for improvement. What they may be lacking is the leadership to organize these resources in a productive and efficient manner. The block club has achieved this goal with its Four Seasons program.

The Thomas-Dale Block Club has raised the spirit of their community by empowering and enabling residents. This has been one of their greatest strengths. The block club has given neighbors the ability and resources to improve their community themselves. They have accomplished the dual goals of providing residents with a forum to voice their concerns and the power of a common voice upon which to be heard. By encouraging people to speak out and take action they have allowed residents to encompass the message that the block club sends out. They have given residents the opportunity to take responsibility for their lives and the betterment of their community. However, there are some areas that they can improve upon to make their impact even greater than what it has been. If these improvements are made the block club will

be an even stronger force in their community. This will have the ability to make even more widespread and lasting change.

My first recommendation for the block club relates to the increase in diversity in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. The Thomas-Dale Block Club recognizes the need to include the growing Asian population in their organization and they have taken steps in that direction. I propose the block club work to further include the growing Asian population, particularly the adults. I think they have done a great job recruiting and including youth in their activities not only because they provide such a range of choices, but also because children tend to be more integrated in the community. It is been much easier for children for whom English is a second language to become involved in the community because of the social opportunities school has to offer. However, adults have had a more difficult time because of language and cultural barriers. I have found through interviews that many residents praise the Asian families on their block for being such great neighbors. They also realize the importance of making them a part of community activities. The block club must include them if they wish to fulfill the mission and goals of their organization. There are a number of ways they can go about doing this. One way is to hire a community liaison that will work directly with the Southeast Asian community and serve as an interpreter and recruiter for the block club. They can also organize activities centered around the concerns of the Southeast Asian community and include key guest speakers who are well-known advocates of this ethnic group. If the block club can harness the sentiments of all people in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood they, will be an even stronger force in their community.

While gathering information for this research paper it was apparent that the Thomas-Dale Block Club has made significant improvements in the Thomas-Dale neighborhood. The number of drug houses in the neighborhood has declined dramatically since the early 1990's and the level of crime has also diminished. Although the block club may have records of these improvements they have not been documented in an organized manner that is easy to understand. Therefore, my second recommendation for the Thomas-Dale Block Club is to compile this information so that it can be shown to others as concrete proof that they have, indeed, positively impacted their community. In the minds of many residents there is no need for convincing. However, it will be

useful to give to people who are skeptical about the improvements the block club has made. The Thomas-Dale Block Club is a grass-roots organization that has accomplished remarkable goals in the past eight years. Its leaders have changed the outlook of an entire community. That effort should be documented as a testament to the positive change a community can undergo by simply harnessing the needs of its residents.

Conclusion

The Thomas-Dale Block Club emerged out of the concerns and frustrations of two Thomas-Dale residents, namely Johnny Howard and Les Barrett, regarding the negative behaviors that were taking place in the neighborhood. From a team of two it has grown into a powerful organization that works to address the issues of all its residents and provide them with a way to get involved in their community. They stress the fact that each individual, children and adults alike, must take responsibility and accountability for making their neighborhood a better place for all residents. The block club has realized many of the goals it set out to accomplish and has the potential to be an even stronger force in the community in the future.

DATE:

OCCUPATION/RELATION TO THOMAS-DALE BLOCK CLUB:

1. HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN LIVING/WORKING IN ST. PAUL?
2. DO YOU INTEND ON STAYING IN ST. PAUL (OR IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD) AT LEAST FIVE MORE YEARS:
3. WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD?
4. WHAT DO YOU DISLIKE ABOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD?
5. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD? HAS THE THOMAS-DALE BLOCK CLUB PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE IN THESE CHANGES?

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